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ABSTRACT

The importance of word analysis skills to reading ability is discussed, and methodologies for teaching such skills are examined. It is stated that a child cannot become proficient in reading if he does not master the skill of associating printed letter symbols with the sounds they represent. Instructional procedures which augment the alphabet with letters and involve respelling of words are, it is suggested, confusing, and the claims of proponents of this methodology are contradictory. Another instructional approach creates dependency on charts for translations of letter to color to sound. A linguistic method rests on the assumption that a child should learn initially only those words which have regular spellings, thus neglecting 61% of 5000 basic vocabulary words with irregular spellings. Programmed reading materials have the advantage of allowing students to work at their own pace, but are lacking in emphasis on reading as a meaning-making activity. Over emphasis on word analysis skills can lead the student to resist reading for meaning or enjoyment. It is concluded that word analysis skills are necessary to reading ability and should therefore be taught systematically, but that reading for meaning and enjoyment should be given equal emphasis. (AL)

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CS 000 007

Developing Word Analysis Skills

The topic that I have been assigned is Developing Word Analysis Skills. This is one of those imprecise terms that abound in the professional literature on reading. It has many synonyms or near synonyms including word attack skills, phonic analysis skills, code cracking, solving words and unlocking words. Other papers being presented at this moment include "Building Word Recognition Abilities" and "Building Strength in Word Attack". The term can also be used so as to have a very broad connotation. In this case it embraces every approach or technique that a would-be reader can utilize to solve an unknown word such as configuration clues, structural analysis, phonics context clues and all of these in combination.

In other sessions of this conference people are discussing comprehension skills, developing appreciation, motivating the child to

read, cognitive aspects of reading and many other facets of meaning oriented reading. By fragmenting the reading process and presenting 2000 word papers on parts of the reading process we have tended to talk ourselves into a number of methodological problems which might not otherwise have existed. We have spent decades debating which should come first phonics or sight reading. When we tire of these terms we change them and debate which comes first Code Cracking or meaning.

When we tolerate such dichotomies we fail to keep in mind that learning to read is a long term developmental process. We also tend to equate reading with one of its subskills. We develop and use materials which teach children to overrely on one skill while neglecting others. When we do this we invariably produce a type of reader that we didn't want to produce. When we notice that we are producing impaired readers we swing the pendulum to the opposite extreme. If we were overemphasizing one skill we now de-emphasize it and stress what we were previously neglecting.

Fortunately there are always a number of teachers who make a conscious effort to see that children get a balanced instructional diet. These teachers do not pledge allegiance to one set of skills and neglect other essential skills. They teach so that a child masters letter-sound relationships, develops a sight vocabulary, and profits from context clues while he is reading for meaning. These absolutely essential skills are not taught in sequence but they are taught concurrently.

When children draw such teachers they have a good chance of learning that reading is a process of translating graphics into language. The manipulation of language is an exciting, dramatic and creative activity.

When learners are caught up in manipulating language--when they view reading as cracking the language code not just a phonemic code--their teachers do not have to ask, "how do you motivate children to read?"

However, a child cannot read for meaning or recreate the melody of language if he cannot solve the words in the sentence and paragraph he is attempting to read. He must develop the ability to decipher words that he does not instantly recognize. This is just another way of saying that all readers must develop a series of reading skills which at the moment we identify as word analysis skills. Undoubtedly the most important of these skills is associating printed letter symbols with the sounds that these letters represent. One could state categorically that a child cannot become proficient in reading at a third grade level if he does not master a goodly number of these letter sound relationships.

The importance of these phonic skills is reflected by the fact that most of the newer instructional approaches and newer instructional materials focus on teaching the letter-sound code. The proliferation of these method-materials also suggest a degree of dissatisfaction with the efficiency with which we were teaching these skills a decade or so ago.

Since methodology and materials reflect instructional philosophy and goals, it would be well for educators to analyze various approaches which are presently vying for acceptance in our classrooms. Here, we can do no more than make a brief reference to some of the recent methodological proposals, each of which aims primarily at developing word analysis skills. As we study the main features of these so-called "newer instructional materials," we will see that there is reason to

believe that there is more current confusion in the area of developing word analysis skills than there ever has been in the past. In one method of instruction the alphabet is augmented so that the 44 letters used will always represent a given sound. However the methodology involves respelling a great number of words which do not involve any of the added letters (hed, luv, enuf, sed, cum, enywun, wuns). Also, there are respellings of a large number of words so that every long vowel sound is represented by a double vowel. This results in some rather strange letter configurations in a number of words which do follow "regular spellings". (wife=wief, find=fiend, radio=rae dee oe, so=soe, night=niet).

Of course, children can learn word analysis skills using this methodological approach. The question educators should be concerned with is whether it represents the best way to teach these skills. There are certain instructional procedures such as those mentioned above that are confusing. Confusion can also arise from reviewing the various claims made by certain of the proponents of this approach. On different occasions spokesman have clarified their goals, philosophy and research findings as follows:

A. This method is <u>not</u> attempting to introduce spelling reform.

B. The purpose of this approach is to bring about spelling reform.

C. There <u>probably will not</u> be any problems of transfer; it <u>appears</u> there were not any transfer problems; there was a serious transfer problem; the problem of transfer is not too important.

D. This approach can be used with any other methodology including the sight word approach (see Word Configurations above).

E. This is not a phonics method. (Why not - since it represents a systematic letter-sound system?)

In another instructional approach (Words In Color) the traditional alphabet and spelling patterns are retained. However, the letter forms are depicted in 39 different colors so that each color now represents a phoneme in English. Since it is impossible to print books in 39 different colors the child reads only material printed black on white. If a child cannot pronounce a printed word and if he knows which particular letters are causing his problem he can study 21 large wall charts until he finds the letter configuration that is defeating him. He then observes the color of these letters and translates the color into an English sound. If this system worked as it is designed to, a child could read only in the presence of these bulky charts.

A so-called linguistic method rests on the assumption that children should learn to read materials that use only those English words that enjoy regular spellings. However, out of a 5000 word basic vocabulary that is to be taught in this approach, only 39 per cent enjoy regular spellings. The remaining 3000 words and all other irregularly spelled words will according to the author of the system "demand a separate effort and separate practice".

Programmed reading materials designed for the early stages of instruction have certain virtues. These materials teach letter names, letter-sound relationships and provide for students to work at their own pace. This does not imply that these materials have built in provisions for differentiation of instruction. It is still quite easy for all children in a given classroom to do the same amount of work on any given skill.

Programmed reading materials can be used to illustrate a second methodological issue of considerable importance. These materials and

all of the others alluded to, aim at cracking the phonemic code and they are limited to beginning reading instruction. Once the beginning stage is over these materials in essence hand the pupils back to the teacher and say in effect "you take it from here". Each of the materials represent a highly mechanistic content which inculcates in children a "set" as to the nature of reading. Since the goals philosophy and content are limited in scope, these materials do not see reading instruction as a long term developmental process. Children are not taught that reading is a language process. The emphasis on reading as a meaning-making activity is minimal. In fact such emphasis may be lacking completely.

Once the child has been exposed to months and months of instruction that focused on letter-sounds or word analysis; teachers are faced with the difficult task of extinguishing the very narrow concept of reading that has been developed. Sometimes this is very difficult to do. Once a "learning set" has been reinforced hundreds of times in reading situations, some children will resist conversion to the proposition that reading is a rewarding stimulating and creative activity.

Children who miss the power and beauty of language in their reading rarely if ever become avid readers. This is easy to understand since the ego satisfaction gained from applying word analysis skills pales rapidly unless these skills become subservient to reading for meaning. Thus, a fast start is not half the race if it involves the development of habits and attitudes toward reading that turn children away from reading.

We can conclude with the same premise that we started with, namely, that mastery of word analysis skills, (specifically letter-sound

relationships) is absolutely essential for becoming an independent reader. These skills should be taught systematically and thoroughly. However, this instruction should not lead children to equate phonemic code cracking with reading. Children use the mechanical tools of word analysis in order to crack the language code. This involves translating strings of word symbols so that the melody of spoken language is recreated.

In one sense, "word analysis" is the mortal enemy of the melody of language. Yet this tool must be used if one wishes to attain that melody.

Our goal should be to achieve an instructional mix which leads the reader to simultaneously--

increase his sight vocabulary

master letter-sound relationships

and utilize context clues,

so that every reading experience results in a translation of visual cues into a meaningful language product.